

# Christmas in Caxton's Time

Describing various customs and manners such  
as prevailed through the festive season during  
the lifetime of this illustrious printer. Made  
up and presented with the season's greetings  
by the Caxton Company at Cleveland, Ohio.



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1920

GENERAL

9-12-16 D.O.





*At Christmas be mercy, and thanke god of all:  
and feast thy pore neighbour the great with the small.  
yea all the yere long have an eie to the poore:  
and god shall sende luck, to kepe open thy doore.*

*Ols Rhyme*



# Christmas in Caxton's Time

*Get iuyr and hull, woman deck up thy house:  
and take this same brawne, for to scethe and to souse.  
Provide us good chere, for thou knowest the old guise  
old customs, that good be, let no man despise*

*Old Rhyme*

**N** days when, as Goethe said, "Every journey was a campaign and every way-farer an armed adventurer," the observant visitor to England, assuming he had evaded the dangers of travel at about the year 1474, would find much to gratify an intelligent curiosity as well as satisfy his desire for seasonable enjoyment; for this was the period when the middle class of England was emerging from its chaos with increased wealth, comparative culture and the enhanced standards of comfort, and in general with the aspirations and ideals of the modern age.

The professional class, and those who had already profited from the advantages of education, must then have held optimistic forebodings of the benefits coming to their nation and language by the introduction of printing from movable types, as was then being practised for the first time in England by Caxton, in the

Almonry at Westminster. Many of us who are interested in that craft and know its blessings are prone to imagine at this time of the year that during that earlier and more memorable Christmas many toasts must have been given to the success of that venture. The fact that the populace was not aware of the powerful influence in its nation's future that was then just starting to work did not prevent them, we may be sure, from gaining all the pleasure and enjoyment that came with Christmas.

## Travel and Inns

This was the time of the year when, as today, home ties made themselves felt most, and favorable weather caused a great number of people to travel who bestirred themselves at no other time of the year.

The inns of these times commanded a higher respect than the common alehouse, since they were patronized by travelers, and the



accommodations afforded by them is well described by an Italian who wrote that, "Foreign visitors to England saw and wondered at the abundance of food, especially at the quantity of meat spread on the table, at the wines which were drunk there, at the custom of the ladies being invited to take a glass at the inns, and at their acceptance of such invitations, at the cleanliness and fineness of the bleached linen, and at the silver and burnished pewter piled on the sideboards of these houses."

We have Rabelais for authority that "the stomach was the father and master of industry," and it is safe to assume on that basis that the inns were very busy places. Knowledge gained by previous travels of the various reputations ascribed to these inns must have

been very valuable, as many of the innkeepers and ostlers were known to be in league with the highwaymen and footpads, and as such were well placed to give these gentlemen of the road whatever information was necessary in the expeditious rifling of certain pieces of baggage. The roads leading from Dover to London were the favorite haunts of the Robinhood Fraternity, knowing as they did that the booty coming along in this direction from the Continent was of the richest, and the Weald of Kent was a locality well worth leaving alone, since it was the hiding-place of the residue of disbanded armies from the civil war.

### Victuals

A peculiar law of this time was to the effect that no baker of white bread could make or sell brown; but were the visitor from London or Westminster, and well supplied with the latest rumors from the courts, or could relate the way the fortune of wars was going beyond the seas, he would be at no loss for want of bread or other food to appease a traveler's appetite, especially if he happened to be in the neighborhood of a Frankelyn, whose position in a village was similar to that of the squire who came later. Being a substantial freeholder, with considerable land, he was frequently known to be profuse and somewhat wasteful in his hospitality, for in

the language of Chaucer, "It snowed in his house of meat and drink," and according to another authority, "His table stood ready covered all the long day." It is to be hoped that such abundance was open to the poor, for it is recorded that their diet for the most part consisted chiefly of fish; and from a Venetian, Petruccio Ubaldini, we learn that the English at this time were disinclined to exertion, and "sow so little that the produce barely suffices for their subsistence, by reason of which they eat little bread, but so much the more meat, which they have of all kinds and perfect quality. Puddings and cheeses are everywhere forthcoming, for numberless herds pasture day and night in the most fertile districts."

### Jugglers

These itinerants provided the principal source of amusement, and since there were no theatres for the people to attend, the jugglers brought the diversions such as we see in them today to the people.

From old prints and descriptions of the jugglers of this period they would appear to be the forerunners of the present-day circus, as they are frequently shown to be accompanied by bears, monkeys and other animals which they taught to dance or to fight. During feasts and banquets these itinerants would practise their antics around the tables, to their



guests' delight, and whilst the eating was going on. In addition to the usual proclivities assigned to these entertainers are to be enumerated music, poetry, dancing, wrestling, boxing and the training of animals. The humblest practitioners of this profession were the mummers, or grimacers, in their many-colored garments, and brazen-faced mountebanks, who provoked laughter at the expense of decency. Theirs was a profitable profession, and Christmas brought to them many presents as well as pay. Their mimicry and acrobatic feats were less thought of than their long poems of war and of venture, which were recited in doggerel rhyme to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. Many of them were foreigners, some of whom, especially

the rope dancers, came from countries as far distant as India.

The Italian invention of fireworks, used at first to celebrate certain saints' days, was received with great enthusiasm, and soon became a regular part of the program for public festivals; so it may be conjectured that they were used to vary the entertainments at Christmas time also.

### **Lord of Misrule**

Christmas revelry in these days was one thing in the palace, another in the convent, a third in the university, and a fourth among the people. At court it was a serious affair, every step of the entertainment was carefully prearranged, and the courtiers laughed, quaffed, and tripped up one another's heels with the nicest attention to program. That anomalous personage with the Hibernian title, the Ruler of Misrule, was an indispensable, if temporary, autocrat at those times.

From an old account of the ceremonies of Misrule, by one not altogether in sympathy, it appears that "All the wild heads of the parish, flocking together, chose then a grand captain of mischief, whom they ennable with the title of Lord of Misrule; and him they crown with great solemnity, and adopt for their king. This king anointed chooseth four and twenty, forty, threescore, or a hundred like himself, to wait

on his lordly majesty, and to guard his noble person. Then every one of these men investeth with his liveries of green, yellow, or some other light wanton color; and as though they were not gaudy enough, they bedeck themselves with scarves, ribbon, and laces, hung all over with gold rings, precious stones, and other jewels. This done, they tie about their legs twenty or forty bells, with rich handkerchiefs, and sometimes laid across their shoulders and necks. Then have they their hobbyhorses, their dragons, and other antics, together with their bawdy pipes and thundering drummers to strike the devil's dance withal. Then march this heathenish company towards the church, their pipes piping, their drums thundering, their bells jingling, their handkerchiefs fluttering about their heads like madmen, their hobbyhorses and other monsters skirmishing amongst the throng. And thus these terrestrial furies spend the day. Then they have certain papers wherein is painted some babelerie or other imagery work, and these they call my Lord of Misrule's badges or cognizances. These they give to everyone that will give them money to maintain them in their heathenish devilry. And who will not show himself buxom to them and give them money, he shall be mocked and flouted shamefully. Yea, and many

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times carried on a cow staff and dived over head and ears in water."

However that may have been, there is no exaggeration made in respect to treatment served out to those who did not show themselves "buxom" to the revelers and their chief, as a certain apparitor attached to the archiepiscopal court of Saint Andrews once proved to his sorrow. This officer, with rare audacity, ventured to serve letters of excommunication issued against the Lord of Borthwick, while the inmates of the castle were celebrating Christmas. Having discharged his duty, the apparitor was seized by the Abbot of Unreason (equivalent to the Lord of Misrule) and his crew, taken to the mill stream and thoroughly well ducked. He was compelled to eat his letters of excommunication to

the last shred, and dismissed with the warning that all similar documents "should gang the same gate."

### **Games**

Most of the games indulged in by the younger generation today at this season of the year, such as Musical Chairs, Secret Whisper, Blindman's Buff, Hide the Thimble, et cetera, formed a part of the entertainment in those days as well as the numerous games of forfeits, which came down from the Courts of Love of a still earlier period. Most of these games required little skill and were purely matters of chance.

The games of Tables, however, required skill and calculation, for under this head were comprised all the games which were played on a board, and particularly draughts, chess and backgammon.

### **Feasts and Ceremonies**

The feast of Noel was celebrated by a procession that started from the church door, made the circuit of the parish, and ended where it began. In front marched the curés and choristers, bearing crosses, banners, and reliques, and occasionally singing anthems. After them came a young girl representing the Virgin, and a young man rather lightly clad and ornamented with a pair of wings as the angel Gabriel.

Then followed a cardboard cock with a child inside. This was succeeded by a cow, a goat, four sheep,

and an ass, or rather by models of these animals, each containing a boy. A fool mounted on a hobbyhorse and provided with bells and bauble closed the array. Every now and then the procession halted. The Angel recited a salutation and kissed his companion, who said, "Fiat", "So be it," though some preferred to translate it into "Do it again." Then, one after another, the cock crew the words "Puer natus est nobis", "Unto us a child is born"; the cow lowed, "Ubi?", "Where?", the sheep baaed, "Bethlehem"; and the ass brayed, "He-haw-mus", to signify Eamus, "Let us go thither." And then as the goats and the fool had nothing in particular to add, the procession moved on, until the next halting place was reached, when the performance was repeated.

Wherever there happened to be a choir, a school was maintained for the instruction of the choristers, to stimulate these youths in their studies, (that they might one day attain to the real mitre), the festival of the Boy Bishop was devised.

On the eve of Saint Nicholas (the Patron of the school boys) the election took place. From the registers of York Cathedral it is learned that the qualification rested as much in his personal attractiveness as merit. Special vestments were reserved for the occasion, and on Saint Nicholas Day he went to the church in great



state, sometimes mounted, and with adequate following. The Statutes of Saint Paul's School (1518) direct that every Childermas the pupils shall go to Saint Paul's to hear the childe-bishop's sermon, and after high mass each shall offer a penny to the childe-bishop.

During the day he and his chapter performed the parts of the bishop and canons; while the real canons took the places of the children, and acted in all respects up to the character.

The text of his sermon appears always to have been, "Suffer little children to come unto me." The balance of the day's routine with its services was repeated year after year and was just a moral lecture to children and nothing more. After the service the boy-bishop and his



followers, assisted by a hired train of mountebanks and minstrels, promenaded the district in search of contributions. They sang gay songs and indulged in laughter, moving antics, and returned to a feast provided by the church-wardens.

### Dancing

The art of the light and fantastic was as popular then as now, despite all the opposition of the Catholic Church, which had for centuries consistently disapproved of it on account of its tendency to corrupt the morals. This pastime, however, lacked no encouragement from the civil powers.

In the social dances it was usual that as soon as the two sexes were assembled in sufficient numbers, before or after the feasts, the balls began, and men and women took

each other by the hand and commenced the performance in regular step. From an old description we find that "Youth and Gaiety opened the ball, accompanied by their sister, Bravery; Cowardice, confused, went of her own accord and hid herself." An interesting round dance was practised in which each person by turn sang a verse, the chorus being repeated by all. Sometimes a minstrel sang songs to the accompaniment of a harp, and the young ladies danced in couples and repeated at intervals the minstrel's songs. Sometimes the torch dance was performed; in this each performer bore in his hand a long, lighted taper, and endeavored to prevent his neighbors from blowing it out, which each one tried to do, though this performance was principally reserved for weddings.

### Wassailing

If we extend our festive season to Twelfth Night, we would come to the picturesque ceremony of "Wassailing," or singing to the apple trees, which is observed yet in a few and isolated instances in West Somerset and some parts of Devonshire, which is the apple district of England, and where cider remains more popular than in other counties.

The farm help, re-enforced by such village worthies as the blacksmith or carpenter, would pay a

yearly visit to the orchards of their neighborhood, beginning their tour in the evening at about seven o'clock. On entering an orchard they would form a circle beneath the largest apple tree and sing their Wassail song, the first verse to this effect:

It is our Wassail round our town,  
Cup it is white and ale it is brown.

The mention of ale in connection with apples is not what one would expect, and appears inconsistent; we find, however, that "Wassail," a word of great antiquity, derived from the Saxon Waes-hael (health to you), is a liquor composed of ale, apples, and sugar, and was at great request at carousals.

After the song, a bucket of hot cider, with toast floating on the top, was sent out by the owner of the orchard, squire or farmer; the toast was placed in the apple tree for robins to eat, while the cider was sprinkled around the roots of the tree, and some, no doubt the major part, lubricated the throats of the singers.

All of which must have presented a picturesque and curious sight. It is only necessary to imagine the snow on the ground, frost on the trees, and the moon shining down through their rugged branches onto the faces of these men, and see the enactment of a custom clearly descended from the Druids.

## Drink

Beer was then, as now, the drink most indulged in by the English masses, the grape and apple always forming a poor second; and in England at this date there was more corn malted than eaten for food. Despite laws which prohibited the adulteration of this beverage, frequent resort was made to the functions of peony seed, garlic, salt, and other provocatives to thirst, leading us to assume that those who had the selling of this commodity feared no shortage in its supply. Alehouses were nearly as plentiful in a village as other houses. In these the alewives were allowed to make as well as sell their product, though not until it had been inspected and tasted by the official aletaster.

Were the occupation of this latter worthy character in vogue today, any auxiliary forces needed for the carrying out of his duties would not be at a disadvantage for need of help made necessary through the demands of the Christmas season, and there are undoubtedly many today who would just as willingly assist in so agreeable a procedure. The age, as well as the purity of the ale or beer, had to be passed on by him before its sale was permitted. The usual price at these houses was one halfpenny per gallon for ordinary ale, whilst London ale, when kept in stock, which was considered better, commanded a

higher price. Hot cider, mead and metheglin came into due consideration, and native and imported wines by those better off.

Of all the provisions made for his enjoyment and partaken of by the visitor, the cup that cheers, no doubt, was plied with the most frequency. Such drinking vessels

that were then in use we know to have been made for liberal portions, and if our guest came from some Italian city he might know of the custom of most of his fellow-citizens, and on his road to his inn in the small hours of the night accept the logic of Cellini's advice and "Turn the corners wide."

*Welcome be ye that are here,  
Welcome be all, and make good cheer  
Welcome all, another year,  
Welcome Yule.*





The Caxton Company  
At Cleveland



